



S O N O M A C O U N T Y

**AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION
AND OPEN SPACE DISTRICT**

May 30, 2008

A.G. Kawamura

Secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture

1220 N Street, Room 121

Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: California Agricultural Vision 2030

Dear Mr. Kawamura:

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District would like to thank you for your foresight to gather farmers and proponents of California agriculture to participate in creating a vision for a more productive, competitive, and innovative agricultural sector by 2030. The District appreciates the opportunity to contribute ideas to the ongoing dialogue of what California agriculture will look like in 20 years. The District has an 18 year track record of working with agricultural producers in Sonoma County to protect their agricultural land by purchasing perpetual conservation easements and eliminating any future development potential.

The District's program, conceived 20 years ago by a group of citizens concerned about the loss of agricultural and open space lands in Sonoma County, culminated in a grass roots community effort which succeeded in passing two voter initiatives in the November 1990 election. These initiatives created the District and funded it with a ¼% of sales tax money collected in Sonoma County. Since its inception in 1990, the District has protected close to 75,000 acres of land including 33,000 acres of productive agricultural land. By an overwhelming 75% majority of the vote in the 2006 election, the citizens extended the District's mandate through 2031.

The District has several creative ideas we would like to offer to this strategic effort. These ideas are rooted in our direct experience with farmers and ranchers in Sonoma County. The majority of these suggestions could very well be transferred to producers in other parts of the State. Some of these ideas pertain more specifically to small farm operations while others are more particular to larger ranches and dairy facilities. Many are applicable to both.

Small Farm Opportunities

In 2002, District staff created a Small Farm Initiative. This Program has two conservation goals for agriculturally zoned lands on the urban fringe: to preserve them in perpetuity from development and to return them to working, productive agricultural landscapes. Many small scale vegetable and fruit farmers are feeling the pressure of rising land values. Vegetable crops do not command the premium prices that Sonoma County wine grapes can, so it has become increasingly difficult for truck farmers to stay competitive let alone thrive. These goals reflect an evolution in thinking about land preservation. We have to be creative in the tools that we use to implement these goals and ensure that Sonoma County's farming land can continue to produce healthy food for our communities.

The District purchased several small properties in areas designated “community separators” in the County General Plan along the Highway 101 corridor during the mid-1990s. The District is working cooperatively with vegetable and fruit farmers to lease or re-sell these properties to farmers who are experienced in farming on the urban edge. However the number of available District-owned properties is not sufficient for the number of small scale farmers who are looking for affordable land.

A significant factor which hinders the purchase of viable agricultural land for small scale farmers is that most properties that are small in size, ranging from 5 to 15 acres, usually means there is no development potential to be purchased. The result is that the value of a conservation easement is low and does not contribute sufficient funds to the project, and the price the farmer has to pay to purchase land protected by an easement is more than most small farmers can afford. It will not always be the case that land will be purchased to extinguish development potential, but purchasing small-scale farms will be primarily to protect its agricultural values to the community. Farmland will need to be purchased by open space districts, land trusts and government agencies specifically for the preservation of continued agricultural production.

The District’s Competitive Matching Grant Program is an existing tool that can assist small scale farmers to purchase small acreage properties by making a grant towards the acquisition of the property so that it can be used for local food production. In this instance, the District is not valuing the conservation easement rather it is contributing funds towards the purchase of the property in partnership with community agricultural organizations. The District will retain a perpetual agricultural conservation easement over the property and will enter into a grant agreement with the farmer.

Many small properties zoned for agriculture near and surrounding cities do not have the capacity to be subdivided, however many of these lands contain areas of unique biological resources, including creeks and riparian corridors, wetlands and oak habitat. By protecting resource rich areas from ongoing agricultural use the value of the land will be diminished because a portion of the property will not be in farming which will make the property more affordable to the farmer, while still having sufficient land for a small farm operation.

Another tool that the District is implementing to accomplish its goals for the Small Farm Program is to impose a deed restriction on a small farm property. As part of the sale of the property, the District requires that the property be used for agricultural purposes. If the farmer is unable to continue agricultural operations and agricultural use of the land has ceased, the farmer will be in default of the agreement with the District. In this case the property will revert to the District. The District can resell the property to another farmer with a deed restriction or the District can lease the property to a small farmer. A deed restriction as part of the conservation easement agreement with the farmer will allow them to more easily acquire a mortgage on the property. Additionally, a deed restriction requiring agricultural production devalues the property making it more affordable to purchase by the farmer.

Healthy Communities

An abundance of locally produced vegetables and fruits are the outcome of a thriving agricultural economy which includes a vital small farm component. However, how this fresh produce is accessed by the community is another story. For many in the community, locally produced food is not affordable or readily available near their homes. One sector of the community which is affected most is children. By working with school districts and health organizations such as Kaiser Permanente, locally grown fresh produce can be available to children through school lunch programs. There are grant programs to assist schools to implement available fresh produce in lunch programs.

Community Gardens

Another way to bring locally produced food to communities is through community gardens. An example of this in Sonoma County is the Bayer Farm in the Roseland community. Roseland is an unincorporated area of the County adjacent to Santa Rosa on its southwest edge. It is a densely populated community which is primarily Hispanic. There are five schools within a one mile radius of Bayer Farm. The City of Santa Rosa applied to the District for a grant to purchase the 6-acre Bayer Farm through the District's matching grant program. With the help of District funding, the City purchased the property. A local non-profit, LandPaths is implementing community farm programs on the property. A community garden, with 18 individual family plots is producing fresh vegetables and fruits for many families in the area. Through these activities, the community is exhibiting ownership of the farm and protecting it from trespassing and vandalism.

Large Scale Farms and Ranches

The District has protected over 10,000 acres of ranchland and dairies within the coastal grasslands, a 130,000 acre area, ranging from Petaluma to the Pacific Ocean. Within this area there are large dairies and livestock ranches. While these agricultural operations face stiff competition from the Central Valley corporate milking farms, these local ranchers have found innovative ways to stay competitive. Most Petaluma dairies have voluntarily switched to organic milk production, selling their milk to local creameries such as Clover Stornetta and Strauss family creamery in western Marin. Some of these dairies have developed farmstead operations such as small cheese factories on their farms.

Through word of mouth and community outreach, the District continues to actively work with ranchers in this area to protect their land through conservation easements, restricting development. The District is dedicated to connecting a large area of protected agricultural land in the coastal grasslands, so that these businesses can continue to thrive and produce healthy milk, butter, cheese and free-range beef for the greater Bay Area. With a large collective of protected land in the Petaluma coastal area, ranchers can be free from unwanted complaints about dust and odor from non-agricultural neighbors.

To accomplish these goals the District will continue to leverage its funding by applying for grants from the USDA Farm and Ranchland Protection Program as it has done in the past receiving \$500,000 in funding towards the acquisition of an agricultural conservation easement over a large ranch in the coastal grassland area of Sonoma County.

Education and Training

The District is working with the Southern Sonoma Resource Conservation District to purchase a dairy site which will provide ongoing training for farmers. The RCD has worked with the agricultural community in the Petaluma River and Sonoma Creek watersheds for over fifty years providing technical and educational assistance. The permanent protection of this working farm will provide an opportunity to protect the land for future generations and help meet the needs of the next generation of farmers. This partnership project will present a diversified working farm that will become a local nucleus for research, education, conservation and agricultural sustainability.

Secondary Services

Protecting agricultural land for healthy food production does not solve all the problems for ranchers and farmers. Another problem facing most agricultural producers in Sonoma County is the viability of secondary services. Businesses such as animal processing facilities are finding it more difficult to stay in operation. The District is in discussions about purchasing land where such secondary service could be located.

Other secondary services are also needed for small farmers and large ranchers as well. Many farmers and ranchers would like to bring their goods to a distribution center to be disbursed to the Greater Bay Area or to large stores such as Safeway and Whole Foods. Other farmers want to produce processed products such as jams, jellies, relishes, mustards, cheeses, churned butter and even frozen foods. The majority of small farmers cannot afford to build processing plants, cheese factories and commercial kitchens, but the idea of having a large cooperative central facility where farmers could work together to make healthy products and have them distributed to local stores would greatly benefit the community at large.

These are just the beginning of creative ideas that the District is evaluating and pursuing to assist in keeping Sonoma County agriculture strong and economically viable. We look forward to hearing other ideas that come out of the listening groups that are being organized throughout the State as part of this innovative new program which you have established.

We hope to contribute again to this process in the future. If you would like to discuss any of these ideas described in this letter please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,



Andrea Mackenzie
General Manager

c: Maria J. Cipriani, Assistant General Manager
Misti Arias, Conservation Program Manager
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